

Why PR is a Critical Component of the Media Mix

By Scott Hornstein

PR is no longer a passive medium and a “nice to have” addition to the media mix. It has proved itself to be a powerful driver of highly qualified response and a necessary element of the media mix.

PR is increasingly replacing print advertising in its ability to create an umbrella of awareness for a product or service at an affordable ROI. Too often, customers see an advertising blitz as the self-serving work of a company with a lot of money. PR enjoys the benefit of the implied third-party endorsement. No company paid for this. This magazine researched the information, found value and wrote a story about the product or company. And if it appears in a periodical, “it must be true.” This is the aura of verisimilitude – the appearance or semblance of truth – that surrounds stories that are published.

“The best way to launch a new brand, in our opinion, is with PR. After the brand has achieved credibility, then a company can switch to advertising to maintain the brand.

“The strength of PR is its ability to generate credibility for a brand. The weakness of PR is the fact that after a brand has become strongly established, it is no longer ‘new’ and further publicity is difficult to obtain.”

– Al Ries

We have found that PR consistently generates the highest quality of responses and leads, which also convert at a higher percentage than any other medium. But PR is most often overlooked by direct marketers. The reason might be because it is a non-traditional direct response medium. It might be because it is not the easiest or most predictable medium to use.

The first step in harnessing the direct response power of PR is to identify the periodicals or online magazines (or “zines”) that the target audience trusts and turns to for information and advice. The more vertical and specific the publication is to the target audience, the more effective PR will be in generating awareness and response. Mass market publications won’t do the trick for most marketers. That’s because there is too much spill given that the target market is too small a percentage of total readership.

Read these publications and become familiar with their content and style. Request the materials they make available to advertisers. This will usually contain their editorial calendar, which will help you with planning and timing. It will tell you what topics they want to cover in upcoming issues. Identify the editors that specialize in stories that are consistent with your product or service. These vertical or affinity publications are always looking for content.

Develop several story ideas (and be prepared to take the idea and bring it to a completed manuscript (should the editor so desire). These ideas must be newsworthy. Editors will rarely publish a puff piece on your product or service. Every editor will be looking for the value to their readership. And – because the objective is awareness and response – you must work into the story a substantial value that readers can only get by contacting your company. This is the critical “call to action” that makes PR so effective as a direct response medium. It turns the story from passive to active – inviting the reader to take action to receive value. The case history at the end of this section on PR will



give you a good example.

Now comes the hard part. We can leverage but we cannot control whether the story gets picked up. And lead times are frequently three to six months. Two strong leverage points:

- The newsworthiness of the story idea and its applicability to the readership of the publication
- Creating a relationship with the editor by consistently providing them with value. In fact, create a mini-IDM program for each editor you target!

The following case history illustrates the power of PR within the IDM Media Mix:

There's a very popular catalog that features a wide selection of specialty papers, blank, patterned, designed, etc., catering to the desktop publishing world. This catalog was originated in a warehouse in New Jersey, the brainstorm of two brothers and their dad. One of the brothers, the youngest, was a very successful paper merchant who serviced businesses throughout the NYC metropolitan area the old-fashioned way – delivering cartons of paper by truck. The oldest brother had the idea of expanding this business into mail order. He was willing to leave his job in real estate to spearhead the endeavor, and his dad, recently retired, was looking for something to do.

It was a great idea, but there was very little start-up money. Investors wanted to see the idea generate some early results before they would fully back it. But that put the fledgling organization in a "catch 22" – since they lacked the funds to place ads and buy lists, which would generate the early results. Their limited working capital was spent on catalog development.

PR was identified as a key leverage point. If they could get magazines to pick up a story, the word would be out. Consumers and businesses would know of the catalog and interest would be generated. Investors would see the coverage and hear the buzz. Articles would be proof-positive that the idea of the catalog had merit. And, PR was basically free. The big investment was time.

The family went to local magazine stands and bought every publication that catered to the desktop publishing market. They took them home, read them, and prioritized the publications which addressed the target market most directly. Within each of these publications they identified the editor(s) who specialized in technology and technology consumables.

Next, they developed several newsworthy stories. One of the best was:

- Given the proliferation of technology, printing methods and devices, which paper works best for each application given the wide variety of paper contents, manufacturing processes and finishes.

And within each story they embedded a call to action – "We offer free paper consultation. If you have a problem or a question, call us and speak to our resident expert. Even the call is free."

The list of publications and editors was divided up among the principals. The story ideas were sent out in small batches of mail. Each story idea had to be followed up with a call and they didn't want to outstrip their ability to follow up within 24 to 72 hours of the editor's receipt of the letter. Each phone call was scripted to ensure that value was imparted, whether by voice mail, the actual conversation or actual contact. Each editor was contacted once a week for six weeks (Six story ideas sent over a six-week period). In PR, persistence counts.

The result: The story was picked up by several key publications which generated impressive response. These were not just folks interested in the free service, these were buyers. A comparison to subsequent baselines of response and conversion shows that these inquirers generated the highest conversion and the highest average order of any subsequent medium or promotional effort.

Here's a comparison of PR and Print from PaperDirect. Each is based on a single insertion

Publicity

Marketing Cost*	# Inquirers	# Sales	Conv.	Av. Order	Total	E:R
\$50	8	6	75%	\$290	\$1740	3%

*Marketing cost was for sample magazines and phone bills.

Print Advertising

Marketing Cost*	# Inquirers	# Sales	Conv.	Av. Order	Total	E:R
\$3500	287	63	22%	\$75	\$4725	74%

*Marketing cost was the cost of placement. Preparation of the ad was amortized over many ads. The goal of the ad was two-fold: sales and list building